Prussian education system

The Prussian education system refers to the system of education established in Prussia as a result of educational reforms in the late 18th and early 19th century, which has had widespread influence since. It is predominantly used as an American political slogan in educational reform debates, since it was adopted by all American K–12 public schools and major universities as early as the late 18th century, and is often used as a derogatory term for education in the service of nation-building, teaching children and young adults blind obedience to authority, and reinforcing class and race prejudice.\[1\] The actual Prussian education system was introduced as a basic concept in the late 18th century and was significantly enhanced after Prussia's defeat in the early stages of the Napoleonic Wars. The Prussian educational reforms inspired other countries and remains important as a biopower in the Foucaultian sense for nation-building.\[2\] Compulsory education on the Prussian example was soon mirrored in Scandinavia, and United States started to adopt the Prussian example. Early American adopters include Daniel Coit Gilman, who set up The General Education Board, later renamed The Rockefeller Foundation, and first president of Johns Hopkins, John Dewey at the University of Chicago, James McKeen Cattell at The University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University, Henry Philip Tappan at The University of Michigan, James Earl Russell at the New York College for the Training of Teachers, and many more. France and the UK failed to introduce similar systems until the 1880s.

The term itself is not used in German literature, which refers to the primary aspects of the Humboldtian education ideal respectively as the Prussian reforms; however, the basic concept remains fruitful and has led to various debates and controversies. Twenty-first century primary and secondary education in Germany and beyond still embodies the legacy of the Prussian education system.

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The basic foundations of a generic Prussian primary education system were laid out by Frederick the Great with his Generallandschulreglement, a decree of 1763, authored by Johann Julius Hecker. Hecker had already before (in 1748) founded the first teacher's seminary in Prussia. His concept of providing teachers with the means to cultivate mulberries for homespun silk, which was one of Frederick's favorite projects, found the King's favor. It expanded the existing schooling system significantly and required that all young citizens, both girls and boys, be educated by mainly municipality-funded schools from the age of 5 to 13 or 14. Prussia was among the first countries in the world to introduce tax-funded and generally compulsory primary education. In comparison, in France and Great Britain, compulsory schooling was not successfully enacted until the 1880s.

The Prussian system consisted of an eight-year course of primary education, called Volksschule. It provided not only basic technical skills needed in a modernizing world (such as reading and writing), but also music (singing) and religious (Christian) education in close cooperation with the churches and tried to impose a strict ethos of duty, sobriety and discipline. Mathematics and calculus were not compulsory at the start and taking such courses required additional payment by parents. Frederick the Great also formalized further educational stages, the Realsschule and as the highest stage the gymnasium (state-funded secondary school), which served as a university-preparatory school.

Construction of schools received some state support, but they were often built on private initiative. Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow, a member of the local gentry and former cavalry officer in Reckahn, Brandenburg, installed such a school. Von Rochow cooperated with Heinrich Julius Bruns (1746–1794), a talented teacher of modest background. The two installed a model school for rural education that attracted more than 1,200 notable visitors between 1777 and 1794.

The Prussian system, after its modest beginnings, succeeded in reaching compulsory attendance, specific training for teachers, national testing for all students (of both genders), a prescribed national curriculum for each grade and mandatory kindergarten. Training of teachers was increasingly organized via private seminaries. Hecker had already in 1748 founded the first Lehrerseminar, but the density and impact of the seminary system improving significantly until the end of the 18th century. In 1810, Prussia introduced state certification requirements for teachers, which significantly raised the standard of teaching. The final examination, Abitur, was introduced in 1788, implemented in all Prussian secondary schools by 1812 and extended to all of Germany in 1871. Passing the Abitur was a prerequisite to entering the learned professions and higher echelons of the civil service. The state-controlled Abitur remains in place in modern Germany.

The Prussian system had by the 1830s attained the following characteristics:

- Free primary schooling, at least for poor citizens
- Professional teachers trained in specialized colleges
- A basic salary for teachers and recognition of teaching as a profession
- An extended school year to better involve children of farmers
- Funding to build schools
- Supervision at national and classroom level to ensure quality instruction
- Curriculum inculcating a strong national identity, involvement of science and technology
- Secular instruction (but with religion as a topic included in the curriculum)

**Outreach**

The overall system was soon widely admired for its efficiency and reduction of illiteracy, and served as a model for the education systems in other German states and a number of other countries, including Japan and the United States.[12]

The underlying Humboldtian educational ideal of brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt was about much more than primary education; it strived for academic freedom and the education of both cosmopolitan-minded and loyal citizens from the earliest levels. The Prussian system had strong backing in the traditional German admiration and respect for Bildung as an individual's drive to cultivate oneself from within.[13]

**Drivers and hindrances**

Major drivers for improved education in Prussia since the 18th century had a background in the middle and upper middle strata of society and were pioneered by the Bildungsbürgertum. The concept as such faced strong resistance both from the top, as major players in the ruling nobility feared increasing literacy among peasants and workers would raise unrest, and from the very poor, who preferred to use their children as early as possible for rural or industrial labor.[3]

The system's proponents overcame such resistance with the help of foreign pressure and internal failures, after the defeat of Prussia in the early stages of the Napoleonic Wars. After the military blunder of Prussian drill and line formation against the levée en masse of the French revolutionary army in the Battle of Jena–Auerstedt in 1806, reformers and German nationalists urged for major improvements in education. In 1809 Wilhelm von Humboldt, having been appointed minister of education, promoted his idea of a generic education based on a neohumanist ideal of broad general knowledge in full academic freedom without any determination or restriction by status, profession or wealth. Humboldt's de:Königsberger Schulplan was one of the earliest white papers to lay out a reform of a country's educational system as a whole.[14] Humboldt's concept still forms the foundation of the contemporary German education system.[15] The Prussian system provided compulsory and basic schooling for everyone, but the significantly higher fees for attending gymnasium or a university imposed a high barrier between upper social strata and middle and lower social strata.[16]

**Interaction with the German national movement**

In 1807 Johann Gottlieb Fichte had urged a new form of education in his Addresses to the German Nation. While Prussian (military) drill in the times before had been about obedience to orders without any leeway, Fichte asked for shaping of the personality of students: “[17] The citizens should be made able and willing to use their own minds to achieve higher goals in the framework of a future unified German nation state.”[18] Fichte and other philosophers, such as the Brothers Grimm, tried to circumvent the nobility's resistance to a common German nation state via proposing the concept of a Kulturnation, nationhood without needing a state but based on a common language, musical compositions and songs, shared fairy tales and legends and a common ethos and educational canon.[19]

Various German national movement leaders engaged themselves in educational reform. For example, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778–1852), dubbed the Turnvater, was the father of German gymnastics and a student fraternity leader and nationalist but failed in his nationalistic efforts; between 1820 and 1842 Jahn's gymnastics movement was forbidden because of his proto-Nazi politics.[20] Later on, Jahn and others were successful in integrating physical education and sports into Prussian and overall German curricula and popular culture.[21]
By 1870, the Prussian system began to privilege High German as an official language against various ethnic groups (such as Poles, Sorbs and Danes) living in Prussia and other German states. Previous attempts to establish "Utraquism" schools (bilingual education) in the east of Prussia had been identified with high illiteracy rates there.[22]

interaction with religion

Pietism, a reformist group within Lutheranism, forged a political alliance with the King of Prussia based on a mutual interest in breaking the dominance of the Lutheran state church. The Prussian Kings, Calvinists among Lutherans, feared the influence of the Lutheran state church and its close connections with the provincial nobility, while Pietists suffered from persecution by the Lutheran orthodoxy. Bolstered by royal patronage, Pietism replaced the Lutheran church as the effective state religion by the 1760s. Pietist theology stressed the need for "inner spirituality" (de:Innerlichkeit), to be found through the reading of Scripture. Consequently, Pietists helped form the principles of the modern public school system, including the stress on literacy, while more Calvinism-based educational reformers (English and Swiss) asked for externally oriented, utilitarian approaches and were critical of internally soul searching idealism.[23]

Prussia was able to leverage the Protestant Church as a partner and ally in the setup of its educational system. Prussian ministers, particularly Karl Abraham Freiherr von Zedlitz, sought to introduce a more centralized, uniform system administered by the state during the 18th century. The implementation of the Prussian General Land Law of 1794 was a major step toward this goal. However, there remains in Germany to the present a complicated system of burden sharing between municipalities and state administration for primary and secondary education. The various confessions still have a strong say, contribute religious instruction as a regular topic in schools and receive state funding to allow them to provide preschool education and kindergarten. In comparison, the French and Austrian education systems faced major setbacks due to ongoing conflicts with the Catholic Church and its educational role.[5] The introduction of compulsory schooling in France was delayed till the 1880s.

political and cultural role of teachers

Generations of Prussian and also German teachers, who in the 18th century often had no formal education and in the very beginning often were untrained former petty officers, tried to gain more academic recognition, training and better pay and played an important role in various protest and reform movements throughout the 19th and into the 20th century. Namely the Revolutions of 1848 in the German states and the protests of 1968 saw a strong involvement of (future) teachers.[3] There is a long tradition of parody and ridicule, where teachers were being depicted in a janus-faced manner as either, authoritarian drill masters or, on the other hand, poor wretches which were suffering the constant spite of prank ing pupils, negligent parents and spiteful local authorities.[24] A 2010 book title like "Germany, your teachers; why the future of our children is being decided in the classroom" shows the 18th and 19th century Enlightenment ideals of teachers[24] educating the nation about its most sacred and important issues.[25] The notion of Biedermeier, a petty bourgeois image of the age between 1830 and 1848er was coined on Samuel Friedrich Sauter, a school master and poet which had written the famous German song "Das arme Dorfschulmeisterlein" (The poor little schoolmaster).[24] Actually the 18th primary teachers income was a third of a parish priest[24] and teachers were being described as being as uppity as proverbially poor. However German notion of homeschooling was less than favorable, Germans deemed the school system as being necessary. E.g. Heinrich Spoerls 1933 "escapist masterpiece"[26] novel (and movie) Die Feuerzangenbowle tells the (till the present) popular story of a writer going undercover as a student at a small town school after his friends in Berlin tell him that he missed out on the best part of growing up by being homeschooled.

Spread to other countries
State-oriented mass educational systems were instituted in the 19th century in the rest of Europe. They have become an indispensable component of modern nation-states. Public education was widely institutionalized throughout the world and its development has a close link with nation-building, which often occurred in parallel. Such systems were put in place when the idea of mass education was not yet taken for granted.[27]

Examples

In Austria, Empress Maria Theresa had already made use of Prussian pedagogical methods in 1774 as a means to strengthen her hold over Austria.[28] The introduction of compulsory primary schooling in Austria based on the Prussian model had a powerful role, a biopower in the sense of Michel Foucault's sense in establishing this and others modern nation states shape and formation.[28]

The Prussian reforms in education spread quickly through Europe, particularly after the French Revolution. The Napoleonic Wars first allowed the system to be enhanced after the 1806 crushing defeat of Prussia itself and then to spread in parallel with the rise and territorial gains of Prussia after the Vienna Congress. Heinrich Spoel's son, Alexander Spoel, "de:Memoiren eines mittelmäßigen Schüler" (Memories of a Mediocre Student) describes and satirises the role of the formational systems in the Prussian Rhine Province during the early 20th century, in a famous novel of 1950, dedicated to Libertas Schulze-Boysen.

While the Russian Empire was among the most reactionary regimes with regard to common education, the German ruling class in Estonia and Latvia managed to introduce the system there under Russian rule.[29][30] The Prussian principles were adopted by the governments in Norway and Sweden to create the basis of the primary (grundskola) and secondary (gymnasium) schools across Scandinavia. Unlike in Prussia, the Swedish system aimed to expand even secondary schooling to the peasants and workers. As well in Finland, then a Russian grand duchy with a strong Swedish elite, the system was adopted. Education and the propagation of the national epic, the Kalevala, was crucial for the Finnish nationalist Fennoman movement. The Finnish language achieved equal legal status with Swedish in 1892. France and the UK failed until the 1880s to introduce compulsory education, France due to conflicts between a radical secular state and the Catholic Church. In Scotland, local church-controlled schools were replaced by a state system in 1872. In England and Wales, the government started to subsidise schooling in 1833, various measures followed till a local School Boards were set up under the Forster Act of 1870, local School Boards providing free (taxpayer financed) and compulsory schooling were made universal in England and Wales by the Act of 1891, schooling having been made compulsory by the Act of 1880. However, unlike Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, both private schools and Home Schooling remained legal in the United Kingdom.

United States

Early 19th-century American educators were also fascinated by German educational trends. In 1818, John Griscom gave a favorable report of Prussian education. English translations were made of French philosopher Victor Cousin's work, Report on the State of Public Education in Prussia. Calvin E. Stowe, Henry Barnard, Horace Mann, George Bancroft and Joseph Cogswell all had a vigorous interest in German education. The Prussian approach was used for example in the Michigan Constitution of 1835, which fully embraced the Prussian system by introducing a range of primary schools, secondary schools, and the University of Michigan itself, all administered by the state and supported with tax-based funding. However, the concepts in the Prussian reforms of primordial education, Bildung and its close interaction of education, society and nation-building are in conflict with some aspects of American state-sceptical libertarian thinking.[31]

In 1843, Mann traveled to Germany to investigate how the educational process worked. Upon his return to the United States, he lobbied heavily to have the "Prussian model" adopted.[12] In 1852, Mann was instrumental in the decision to adopt the Prussian education system in Massachusetts Governor Edward Everett of Massachusetts instituted a mandatory education policy based on the system.[32] Mann persuaded his fellow modernizers, especially those in his Whig Party, to legislate tax-supported elementary public education in their states. New York state soon set up the same method in 12 different schools on a trial basis. Most northern states adopted one version or another of the system he established in Massachusetts, especially the program for "normal schools" to train professional teachers.[33]
Americans were especially impressed with the Prussian system when they set up normal schools to train teachers because they admired the German emphasis on social cohesion. That led to the establishment and proliferation of factory model school programs and facilities through to the end of the 20th century. During the 20th century, however, the progressive education movement emphasized individuality and creativity more and opted for a less European-inspired curriculum and lower social cohesion and uniformity.[34] The Progressives faced a major setback with the Sputnik crisis, which led again to more focus on quality education and selectiveness of the school system.[35] The derogatory use of the term may contrast 19th-century pedagogy (see the poisonous pedagogy debate in Germany) with the introduction of new technology into classrooms during the Information Age. While Joel Rose appreciates Mann's commitment to a public education but is aiming at renewing how to deliver it,[35] authors like Conservative Party of New York State activist John Taylor Gatto and further home-schooling activist Sheldon Richman claim that illiteracy rates in the US were lower before compulsory schooling was introduced.[36]

**Policy borrowing and exchange**

The basic concept of a state-oriented and administered mass educational system is still not granted in the English-speaking world, where either the role of the state as such or the role of state control specifically in education faces still (respectively again) considerable skepticism.[27] The actual process of “policy borrowing” between different educational systems has been rather complex and differentiated.[37] Mann himself had stressed in 1844 that the US should copy the positive aspects of the Prussian system but not adopt Prussia's obedience to the authorities.[38] One of the important differences is that in the German tradition, there is stronger reference to the state as an important principle, as introduced for example by Hegel's philosophy of the state, which is in opposition to the Anglo-American contract-based idea of the state.[39]

**Drill and serfdom**

Current American critics of the Prussian system use purported Prussian drill and Prussian serfdom, actually predating 1807, as counterclaims against compulsory education.[40][41] However, slavery and the 17th-century Prussian drill, the latter introduced to America by Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben during the American Revolutionary War,[42] were actually of much longer and continued influence on the US and its military than in Prussia itself.

Early Prussian reformers took major steps to abandon both serfdom and the line formation as early as 1807 and introduced mission-type tactics in the Prussian military in the same year. The latter enlarged freedom in execution of overall military strategies and had a major influence in the German and Prussian industrial culture, which profited from the Prussian reformers' introduction of greater economic freedom. The mission-type concept, which was kept by later German armed forces, required a high level of understanding, literacy (and intense training and education) at all levels and actively invited involvement and independent decision making by the lower ranks. Its intense interaction with the Prussian education system has led to the proverbial statement, "The battles of Königgrätz (1866) and Sedan (1870) have been decided by the Prussian primary teacher."[43]

**Legacy of the Prussian system after the end of the monarchy**

In 1918, the Kingdom of Prussia became a republic. Socialist Konrad Haenisch, the first education minister (Kultusminister), denounced what he called the "demons of morbid subservience, mistrust, and lies" in secondary schools.[44] However, Haenisch's and other radical left approaches were rather short-lived. They failed to introduce an Einheitsschule, a one-size-fits-all unified secular comprehensive school throughout Germany.[45]

The de:Weimarer Schulkompromiss (Weimar educational compromise) of 1919 confirmed the tripartite Prussian system, ongoing church influence on education, and religion as a regular topic, and it allowed for peculiarities and individual influence of the German states, widely frustrating the ambitions of radical leftist educational reformers.[45] Still, Prussian educational expert de:Erich Hylla (1887–1976) provided various studies (with titles such as "School of Democracy") of the US education system for the Prussian government in the 1920s.[38] The Nazi government's 1933 Gleichschaltung did away with state's rights, church influence and democracy and tried to impose a unified totalitarian education system and a Nazi version of the Einheitsschule, with strong premilitary and antisemitic aspects.
Legacy of the Prussian System after 1945

After 1945, the Weimar educational compromise again set the tone for the reconstruction of the state-specific educational system as laid out in the Prussian model. In 1946 the US occupation forces failed completely in their attempt to install comprehensive and secular schooling in the US Occupation Zone. This approach had been endorsed by High Commissioner John J. McCloy and was led by the high-ranking progressive education reformer Richard Thomas Alexander,[46] but it faced determined German resistance.[46] The fiercest defender of the originally Prussian tripartite concept and humanist educational tradition was archconservative Alois Hundhammer, a former Bavarian monarchist, devout Catholic enemy of the Nazis and (with regard to the individual statehood of Bavaria) firebrand anti-Prussian coauthor of the 1946 Constitution of Bavaria. Hundhammer, as soon as he was appointed Bavarian minister of Culture and Education, was quick to use the newly granted freedoms, attacking Alexander in radio speeches and raising rumors about Alexander's secularism, which led to parents' and teachers' associations expressing fears about a reduction in the quality of education.[47] Hundhammer involved Michael von Faulhaber, Archbishop of Munich, to contact New York Cardinal Francis J. Spellman, who intervened with the US forces; the reform attempts were abolished as soon as 1948.[47]

Current debates referring to the Prussian legacy

The Prussian legacy of a mainly tripartite system of education with less comprehensive schooling and selection of children as early as the fourth grade has led to controversies that persist to the present.[48] It has been deemed to reflect 19th-century thinking along class lines.[49] One of the basic tenets of the specific Prussian system is expressed in the fact that education in Germany is, against the aim of the 19th-century national movement, not directed by the federal government. The individual states maintain Kulturhoheit (cultural predominance) on educational matters.

The Humboldt approach, a central pillar of the Prussian system and of German education to the present day, is still influential and being used in various discussions. The present German universities charge no or moderate tuition fees. They therefore lack the more lavish funds available for example to Ivy League universities in the US, which make possible a quality of education and research that enable academics and students to fully realize Humboldt's ideal.[50] The perceived lack of universities on the cutting edge in both research and education has been recently countered via the German Universities Excellence Initiative, which is mainly driven and funded at the federal level.

Germany still focuses on a broad Allgemeinbildung (both 'generic knowledge' and 'knowledge for the common people') and provides an internationally recognized in-depth dual-track vocational education system, but leaves educational responsibility to individual states. The country faces ongoing controversies about the Prussian legacy of a stratified tripartite educational system versus Comprehensive schooling and with regard to the interpretation of the PISA studies.[51] Some German PISA critics opposed its utilitarian “value-for-money” competence approach, as being in conflict with teaching freedom, while German proponents of the PISA assessment referred to the practical usability of Humboldt’s approach and the Prussian educational system derived from it.[23]

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